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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, May 6, 1938.

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SUBJECT: "ASPARAGUS TIPS". Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Today I'm bringing you some shopping and cooking tips on asparagus--slender, aristocratic asparagus that comes to springtime markets in exclusive green and white bunches.

There will be plenty of asparagus for you to bring home in your market basket during this month of May. For there is still some of the large California crop available. And just coming into production are the local commercial asparagus areas in the Northern States. Also many home gardens are yielding their choice asparagus cuttings.

I won't try to recount all the good points of asparagus--its food value and its general attractiveness. And I couldn't begin to describe its luscious flavor.

But just for the sake of the record, let me mention here that the very green asparagus is a good source of vitamin A. This green asparagus is the kind that is most plentiful on the market--it's known to the market men as "long, green grass". The greener this grass the more vitamin A it is likely to have.

Green asparagus is also a good source of iron. And both green and white varieties contribute some vitamin C to the diet.

And here's something more to be said for asparagus--tho its probably more literary than scientific. According to the English essayist, Charles Lamb, "asparagus seems to inspire gentle thoughts".

Whether or not asparagus actually does inspire gentle thoughts there is one thing certain. It will inspire even greater appreciation if it is prepared and cooked in the right way.

And that brings me to the real point of this talk--the tips for shopping--preparing--and cooking asparagus.

First for shopping. Of course it's well known that asparagus is never a bargain vegetable. That is, compared to carrots or cabbage for instance, the price of asparagus is always fairly high. And when asparagus first comes to market in the spring it is out of reach of many budgets.

But as the supply of asparagus increases the cost usually comes down so that even those on modest food budgets can afford it. Fortunately, asparagus is cheapest and freshest when it is most plentiful.

When you shop for asparagus--look for stalks that are firm and fresh. Asparagus of the best quality has stalks that are fairly straight. And the tips

are uninjured and tightly closed.

On the other hand, asparagus of poor quality may be wilted and stringy. You can detect this by the slightly discouraged appearance of the bunch. And the tips and scales of lower grade asparagus may be spread out from the stalk. This means that the asparagus is probably overly mature. Stalks that are very crooked usually indicate disease or injury.

So much for the shopping--now for the preparation and cooking.

First--give the asparagus a thorough washing. For it is cut below the surface of the ground. Scrape off the side scales with a sharp knife to remove any grit. And cut off the stalk from the lower end to the point where it will cut readily with the tip of a sharp knife.

A convenient way to prepare asparagus for cooking is to tie the stalks into individual servings. Tie into separate bunches as many stalks of asparagus as each individual will have for a portion. Then cook them.

And for cooking asparagus the rule is the same as it was back in the days of Emperor Augustus Caesar who coined the phrase "quicker than you can cook asparagus". For asparagus is like other green vegetables. It should be cooked quickly--in a small quantity of boiling water--with the lid off the pan.

Use either a special asparagus cooker or a large saucepan or kettle. Have in it enough water to come about half way up the asparagus stalks as they stand upright. Get the water to boiling. Then add the asparagus.

When you add the asparagus to the water, the water will naturally stop boiling. If you want to speed up the cooking of the asparagus, leave the lid on the pan just long enough for the water to come to boiling again.

Then remove the lid and let the stalks cook standing upright from 10 to 15 minutes. The less tender, bottom part of the asparagus will be in the water--the more tender tips out. After 10 or 15 minutes, tip the bunches over into the water. Then finish boiling the asparagus--until the tips and stalks are both tender. If you've timed it right, they will both be done at the same time.

The total boiling time for the asparagus will be from 15 to 25 minutes depending upon the condition of the asparagus. When it is done the asparagus should be tender, but firm enough to handle without crushing.

When you get asparagus to this point there are any number of possibilities for it. Combine it with Hollandaise sauce--use it in salads--sieve it into soups--combine it with bland foods such as macaroni. Or perhaps best of all, just put it on a slice of hot buttered toast, add a little more melted butter for seasoning, and make it your main dish at supper some fine spring evening. It was an old Roman custom, you remember, when Caesar was Emperor.
